

Romance of the Button Industry Is Absorbing

Where the Billions of Buttons Come From

If you lose a button you are decidedly annoyed, but you never give a thought to the history of that button or to the millions upon millions of other buttons that are turned out yearly in this country.

And yet button-making must be considered one of our most essential industries, for there remain but few isolated spots in this world where buttons are not used.

The American people alone use \$32,000,000 worth of buttons each year. Two plants manufacture the buttons and more than \$20,000,000 is invested in the industry.

Sixty thousand tons of mussel shells are fished up in fresh-water streams yearly to be made up into buttons and from these shells nearly a half million dollars' worth of pearls are extracted.

JUST suppose everybody in the United States were to awake some morning and find that every button had disappeared from their wearing apparel during the night and that no buttons could be found anywhere in the world.

Can you imagine the consternation such a predicament would cause? Imagine staid old business men, ministers, and some others that you know trying to make themselves presentable through the aid of twine, nails or safety pins!

Everybody would then fully appreciate the vital duty performed by buttons in everyday life.

Old-timers would joyfully recount the doings of their happy childhood when one of the popular games consisted of playing that thrilling game, "Button, button, who's got the button?"

It is barely possible that one could stop every person on the principal street of any town in the United States during a walk of a mile and not find any one who could tell where, how, and of what material the buttons on their various articles of clothing are made.

Like nearly every other article of everyday use, few people know anything about buttons, preferring very often to look into such subjects as Chinese opera in the sixth century or the lack of humidity and humanity as contributing causes of the falling off of births and deaths on the Desert of Sahara.

It is rather surprising to know that buttons are made of such queer things as nuts, potatoes, hoofts of animals, horns, blood, porcelain, skim milk, glass, seaweed, and shells, as well as various kinds of metals.

Buttons are children of civilization. The people usually designated as savages use string to fasten their clothes together. The Greeks and Romans got along with merely a girdle; the flowing, sheet-like nature of their garments not requiring anything more certain in the nature of fastening.

Buttons were first used on clothing for ornamental purposes. This was soon followed by loops and buttons. The evolution of the buttonhole came last of all. Buttons were first used in Southern Europe in the thirteenth century.

The manufacture of buttons, as far as it might be referred to as an industry, was commenced in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Pronounced changes of dress since that period have naturally produced varying changes in button manufacture. Inventions and foreign competition have likewise had their effect. Birmingham, England, has always been the great button manufacturing center of Europe.

Brass buttons were made in Philadelphia as early as 1750. A few years later Benjamin Rudolph began making wooden buttons in that city.

A button factory was started at Waterbury, Connecticut, in 1800. That city has since become the center of metal button manufacturing of this country. The manufacture of covered buttons by machinery instead of by hand was begun in 1827 by Samuel Williston, at East Hampton, Massachusetts. Horn buttons were made in this country as early as 1812, the horns of cattle forming the raw material.

Vegetable ivory buttons have been made in the United States since 1859. This branch now ranks third in the button industry.

Various kinds of composition buttons have been made at Newark, New Jersey, since 1862, where a button resembling vegetable ivory was produced from certain fossil and vegetable gums combined with finely comminuted carbonate of lime, feldspar or mica. Composition buttons are being manufactured from various materials, among them the Irish potato, which when combined with certain acids becomes as hard as stone. Other materials are casein from skim milk, blood and brown seaweed.

Vegetable ivory is one of the most popular materials for the making of buttons. It is made from the fruit of a South American palm called the coroz nut, and really resembles pure ivory, though of course

considerably softer. They are easy to manufacture on account of their susceptibility to dye and the ease with which they can be turned in a lathe. The big romance in the button industry, as far as the United States is concerned, resulted from the taking of a bath in the Sangamon River, in Illinois, by J. F. Boepple in July,

1887. That bath was the direct cause of the inauguration of the pearl button industry in this country, which has since developed to a marvelous extent. More pearl buttons are now being made than all others.

While plunging around in the water Boepple cut his foot, and being of a curious temperament, sought to ascertain the cause of the accident. To his amazement he found the bottom of the river to be covered with mussel shells. They were just exactly what he had been looking for since coming to America from his home in Ottensen, Germany, near Hamburg, where he had been employed as a turner and button worker. A few years before leaving there a fellow workman brought to the shop a small box of shells of a variety of which they had no knowledge. He said they had been shipped to his father years previously from some place in America about 200 miles south-

west of Chicago. At odd times he experimented on the shells and convinced himself they would make good buttons. The following year he packed his tools and a small turning lathe and embarked for America, determined to find the place that produced such wonderful shells. The use of the river as a bathtub revealed the hidden treasure, which today enables the fond mother to place a wee pearl button on her baby's first nightie, and everybody else to use these buttons from childhood to old age.

Boepple inaugurated the present great pearl button industry by starting a factory at Muscatine, Iowa, in 1891.

It is a fact, however, that in the late eighties pearl button factories were in operation at Cincinnati, Ohio, and St. Paul, Minnesota, but they used imported ocean pearl shells, although their factories were on the banks of excellent shell-bearing streams. It is one of the strange ironies of life that a workman had to travel three thousand miles to show those people that thousands of tons of raw material lay at their very door.

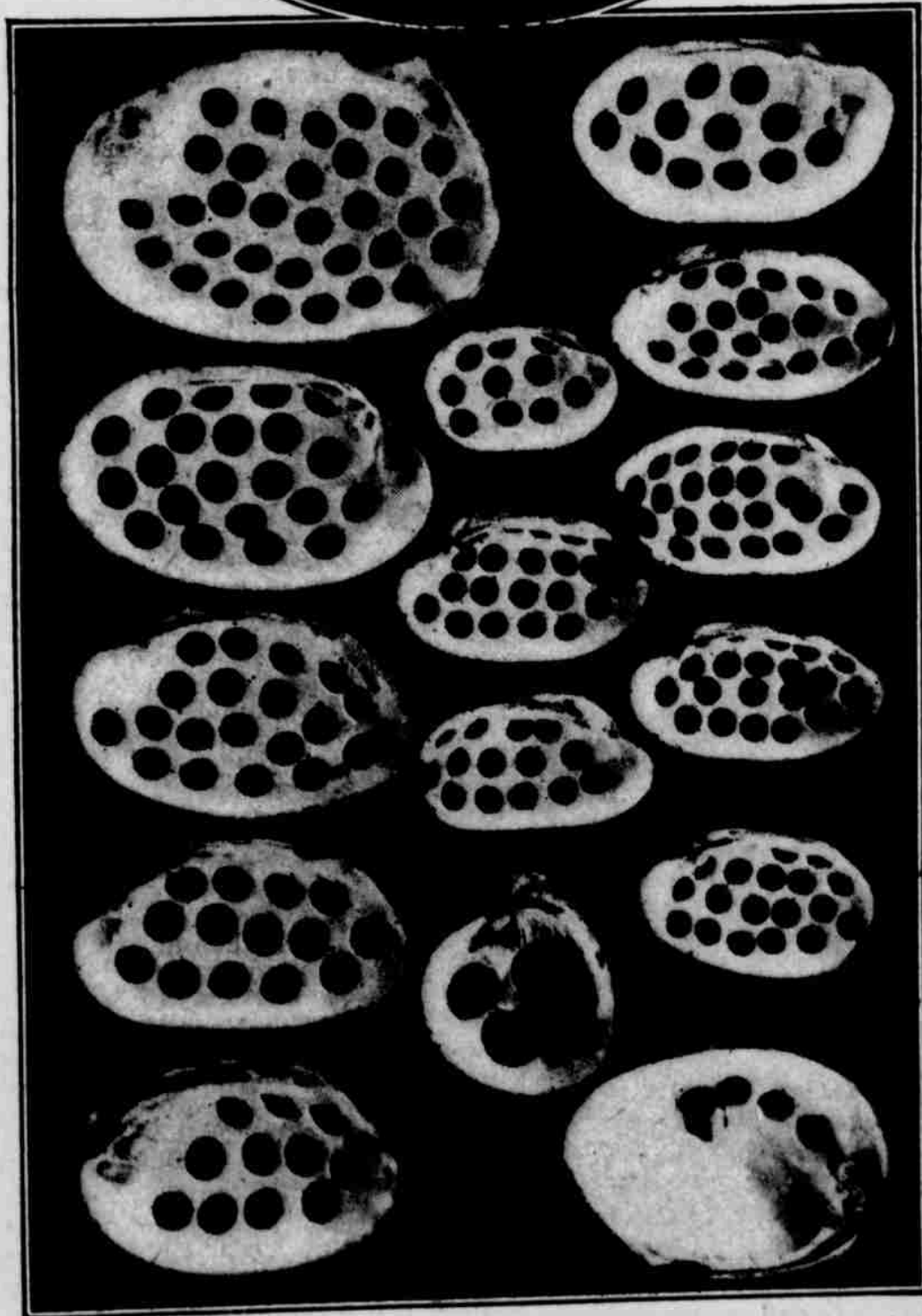
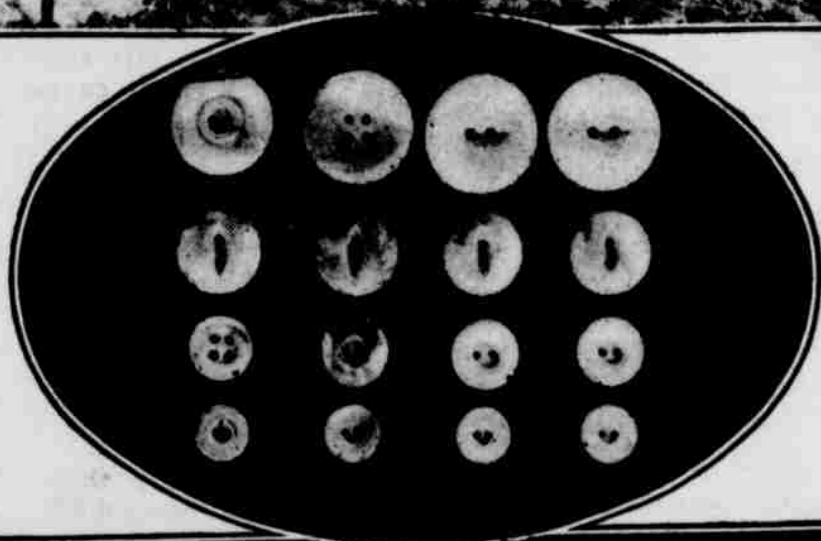
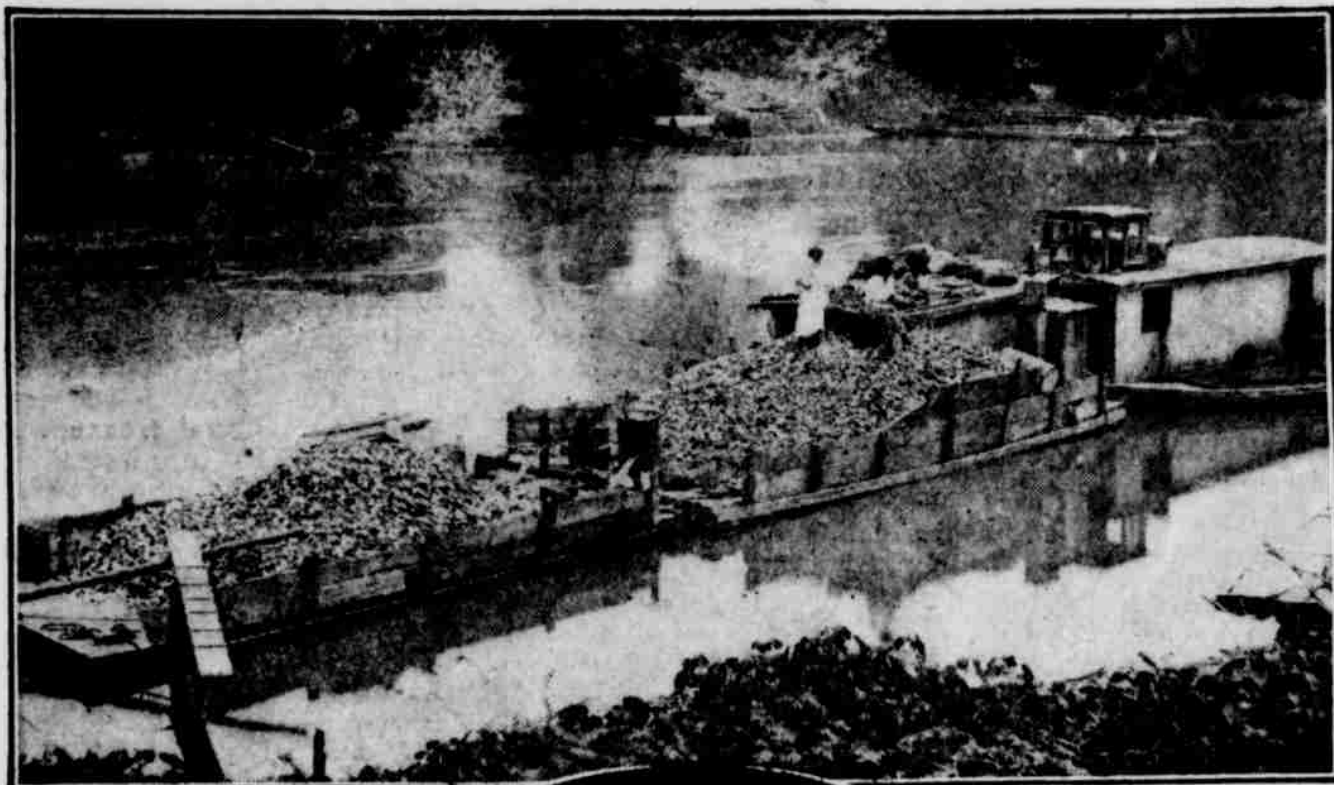
The demand for shells for button making has brought into existence the mussel fishing industry. The men engaged in mussel fishing gather from 40,000 to 60,000 tons of shells annually, worth from \$800,000 to \$1,000,000. In addition to this they find from \$300,000 to \$400,000 worth of pearls every year.

There are approximately 500 species of fresh-water mussels in the United States. The commercial species are practically restricted to flowing waters derived from the drainage of limestone regions. Such waters include most of the streams of the Mississippi Basin and some of those of the Great Lakes and Gulf drainages. Here the mollusk finds an abundance of lime, as well as of food, with the depths of water, currents, and other conditions favorable to its reproduction and growth. Many species of mussels appear in the streams of the Atlantic Coast, but their shells are either chalky and eroded or else too small and too thin for commercial use. Fresh-water mussels of commercial value have not yet been found in streams on the Pacific Slope.

Each year Americans use \$32,000,000 worth of buttons, including fresh-water pearl, ocean pearl, metal, vegetable ivory, cloth, bone, composition, celluloid and other specialties; the bulk of them, however, are made from mussel shells. There are now 200 plants in this country employing shells in the manufacture of buttons. They are located in Maryland, West Virginia, Alabama, Arkansas, Kansas, Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Wisconsin.

The capital invested in button factories aggregates \$20,000,000. The annual pay roll of the employees amounts to \$8,000,000.

A grand total of 8,640,000,000 buttons of all kinds are made in this country each year which is 80 for each person. Therefore if your tailor or dressmaker does not put that many on your clothes you will know that some other person is wearing a portion of your shirt.



Top—Barges loaded with mussel shells taken from a river in Arkansas to be used in making pearl buttons.

Center—Finished buttons made from mussel shells.

Bottom—Mussel shells showing how discs for making buttons are sawed out by machinery.